

**POLITICIZING RELIGIONS AND RELIGIONIZING POLITICS:
A CRITICAL INTERPRETIVE READING OF DAVID DAVIDARS
NOVEL *THE SOLITUDE OF EMPERORS***

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ABSTRACT

David Davidar's novel *The Solitude of Emperors* presents the contemporary situation of secular India. Even though India has been declared as a secular country, some religions do not follow the secular concepts. They interfere with political affairs and creating religious violence. More than that, the fundamentalists are using the religion as a weapon to make their own life as sophisticated as possible. With these concepts as backdrop Davidar compiles a set of incidents happened in India to generate the secular doctrines from the minds of the readers. He also wishes to wipe out the violence in the name of religion.

Davidar's intention to write this novel is to find out the solution for the national wide problems of Hindus, Muslims and Christians and take out the indirect problems faced by the Indian people through his novel, *The Solitude of Emperors*. The plot of the novel is fairly straight – forward and it brings out the crisis of secularism in the 21st century. This novel provides a believable Indian scenario of where such politics might lead in the long term. It also opens our eyes to see the uglier sides of Indian culture. This book within the book (three manuscripts) attempts to define secularism as a messianic force that will eventually lead to the creation of an India that maintains its religiosity without compromising its pluralism.

KEYWORDS: David Davidar, Fundamentalism, Politics, Religion, Secularism, The Solitude of Emperors

ABBREVIATION

TSOE – The Solitude of Emperors

INTRODUCTION

Contents

This paper attempts to discuss how Politicize Religions and Religionize Politics in India with the evidences taken from David Davidar's novel *The Solitude of Emperors*. The novel is constructed with two major incidents such as Bombay Riots and Meham Riots. He wrote three manuscripts about the three great men Ashoka, Akbar and Gandhi which has blended with autobiographical elements throughout the novel.

In this novel, Davidar voices out to enlighten the Indian societies from the darkness of the misguidance of fundamentalists. The strength of religious fundamentalism does not allow secularization to triumph in the modern world. Fundamentalism has arisen in deference of traditional beliefs. It has more to do with how beliefs are defended and justified, than with the content of the beliefs, themselves. Although fundamentalism sets itself in opposition to modernity, it also

employs modern approaches in asserting its beliefs. It also further unfolds the poignant effects of politics and religion on secularism.

Davidar, a post modern Indian writing English novelist wrote the novel, *The Solitude of Emperors* with pre – determined political agendas. He is searching for secularism in the secular India and he fails to see it. He needs a peaceful life and also he wishes to achieve good things for the welfare of the people. We can find his hatredness towards fundamentalism and sectarianism from the juice of the novel. His argument is that many religions proclaim that they are peaceful and opposed to violence, but these same religions generally have traditions with violence and war. It does not only exist, but this violence becomes a form of religious devotion like prayer or reading scripture.

The Solitude of Emperors, the second novel of David Davidar published by Penguin Group, Canada. It is a reminder of secularism and communalism in India. In an interview Davidar revealed that:

The main cause was, you know, that India, as I say at some point in the novel, is one of the longest running plural societies in the history of civilizations. Every religion, every race, used, known to man, has lived in India for thousands and thousands of years. Every time fundamentalists whether Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Sikh, Buddhist, try to disturb the peace, I think people who believe in the peace of nations, communities, all right thinks man, in whatever way they can should protest and say it is not right or point it out whatever way they can" (www.dreamink.blogspot.in)

Religion exists in all known societies, although religious beliefs and practices vary from culture to culture. All religions involve a set of symbol, involving feelings of reverence, linked to rituals practiced by a community of believers. Generally, religion provides justification for the inequalities of wealth and power found in the society. More than that religion is important because of the interrelated functions it serves, especially in ensuring that people meet regularly to affirm common beliefs and values. The facts of the two real incidents are occurred very severely and cruelly. In this novel, Davidar does not exaggerate the incidents but tells the facts submissively. The competition held for the ownership of the holy places not for their spiritual beliefs but for their power politics. Religions have failed to inculcate a spirit of social unity and brotherhood. Of course, they perpetuate feeling of sectarian standards and where standards differ; there can hardly any unity in human relationship.

D. R. Jatava in his book *Glimpses of Indian Social Thought* said: "What mankind needs is neither religion nor a precise gospel such as Marxism or Maoism in Indian social situation". (399)

Fundamentalism has become common among some believers in different religious groups across the world. They believe in returning to the fundamentals of their religious doctrines. Islamic fundamentalism has affected many countries in the Middle East following the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran. Christian fundamentalism in the United States is a reaction against secular values and a perceived moral crisis in American Society. Hindu fundamentalism has also affected the secular India during the Communal Riots in the past two or three decades. Davidar said that religious fundamentalism is considered as a destructive force, because in Meham, the real truth is that the believers of all religions came there and worship in the Tower of God, but the fundamentalists collapse the peaceful environment and kindle them to fight against one another.

Secularism refers to the declining influence of religions in political affairs. The people belonging to different faiths and sections of society are equal before the law, the constitution and government policy. Our need or requirement is

that there can be no mixing up of religion and politics. Most major religions accept the primacy of the rules of secular democratic society but still they seek to influence political decisions or achieve specific privileges through their influence of the sectarians.

According to Davidar, in an interview in Decan Herald with Dipti Nair:

When we of different faith classes and castes, gained independence and dreamed of a new India, we would not be swayed by the religious ideologies and mischief makers who threatened our tolerance, pluralism and stability. The reason for Gandhi brought us our freedom was that India had always been the most plural of countries, a country that contained the world. Our people had come from everywhere; they were descended from central Asian tribes, Mongol Warlords, Portuguese adventures, Arabian Seamen, Chinese travelers, Buddhist princes, Jewish wanderers, British traders, Christian apostles, Macedonian Soldiers. (www.amazon.com)

With those arguments Davidar asks many questions to the fundamentalists and the readers of the novel. Then he gives a solution from his own knowledge and belief i.e., "to be solitude". He cites examples of three great people's life such as Ashoka, Akbar and Gandhi. He thinks that solitude has more power to achieve great things. It is written as three manuscripts by Mr. Sorabjee the publisher of "The Indian Secularist". In that manuscript, Sorabjee, said that the three great people are leading the secular life and they have interested in the religious faith also. He selected these three people because they are the disciples of three religions. Akbar, an Islam Believer Ashoka, a Buddhist and Gandhiji from Hinduism. But they have done many good things to their nation and people belonged to all religions. The solitude and meditation gave them learning about themselves and it leads to develop a true path of their life.

In the western societies, there is complete freedom of religion. The concept is that one may believe in any religion or none at all. They believed religion does not dictate political decisions and religious influence is largely minimized in public affairs. Totally, when there is fall in politics of religions, naturally secularism will arise in the society.

The two major incidents quoted in this novel are related to the religious politics. In Bombay, there are violent clashes between the Hindus and Muslims and in Maham the violence occurred between Hindus and Christians. They kill people on the roads and streets of those places. All people get afraid of those brutal activities of the fundamentalists and hide themselves like rats and snakes in the cribs and holes. The religions have announced the death people as martyrs. But the reality is that they are the victims. In Meham, the Tower of God issue, Vijay tries to compromise the situation, but at the end of the agitation, Noah and Rajan died as victims. Any kind of politics in the world will be ended with a great destruction. The politics of religions is commonly a bane to the nation. It will be spoiled all the growth of the country.

The mixture of religion and politics is on public display throughout the country. Kenneth Cauthen in his book *The Ethics*:

Religion and politics has to do with two spheres of activities in the life of the same persons. Citizens who belong to religious groups are also members of the secular society,

and this dual association generates complications. Religious beliefs have moral and social implications, and it is appropriate for people of faith to express these through their activities as citizens in the political order. The fact that ethical convictions are rooted in religious faith does not disqualify them from the political realm. However, they do not have secular validity merely because they are thought by their exponents to be religiously authorized. They must be argued for in appropriate social and political terms in harmony with national values. (45)

Religion is a set of beliefs and practices that are determined by one's view of reality and the supernatural. Politics is the process by which groups make decisions. The injection of politics into almost any other realm automatically creates a general sense of conflict because politics is in its basest level, a power struggle. A religious group's internal politics will involve factions with different perspectives regarding policies, and when people of faith take an active interest in external politics, those who adhere to other faiths often take offence at their actions. Political actions in the general population will often oppose the beliefs of various religions and will create conflict between the religion and society as a whole. And when a particular religion controls government, anyone who does not agree with the tenets of the faith will have conflict not only with the religion but also with the government.

The western interpretation of secularism is the strict separation of Church and State, but as that would never have worked in this country, where religion pass through every aspect of daily life, our founding fathers took it to mean an even-handedness or neutrality towards all faiths. We practice secularism in the Indian sense of the word without quite realizing it while we remain true to our faith we tolerate every other faith without much of an effort. The unique strength of our society is that over the centuries most of us have developed an innate secularism that allows us to coexist cordially. Unfortunately, this secularism has always been under attack by people with a less morality.

The real sense of a fundamentalist is not at all the follower of the good doctrines of his own religion. Because the intention of the religions is to make a peaceful world but the fundamentalists destroy the peaceful life in the earth. Religious fundamentalism describes the approach taken by religious groups who call for the literal interpretation of basic scripture or texts and believe that the doctrines which emerge from such readings should be applied to all aspects of social, economic and political life. They believe that only one view of the world is possible and that their view is the correct one and also there is no ambiguity or multiple interpretations.

In India, according to the statistics there are six major religions existing today. These six religions are divided into many groups. Some of them come under minority groups and some others come under majority groups. Countries like India should have the sense of secular ideologies. Then only these countries can lead democracy. The majorities may suppress the minorities in the name of religious faith. Generally; religions are in search of eternal life through their rituals and doctrines. Here we may ask a question, For whom these religions are searching the eternal life? From this concept; God is ready to give the eternal life to each and everyone. But some sects of people create religious violence over another religion and they want to be powerful sects. They use religion for developing their own political power and also for their survival. In the midst of the fundamentalists and sectarians, some atheists are also living here and there. According to the doctrines of the religion, they are only giving solace to human beings. Contradiction to that, human beings are shedding

blood in the name of religion. So Davidar said vehemently, that religions should not intrude in any political affair of a country.

D' Souza Leela in her book *The Sociology of Religion* says: "The secularization 'theory' had emerged more by error than by intent and had so gripped the mind of scholars that they foresaw a new age of society without the dominance of religion"(223).

Smith in a classical discussion, "India as a secular state" has defined the 'secular state'. Secular state as a state which guarantees individual and corporate freedom of religion, deals with the individual as a citizen irrespective of his religion, is not constitutionally connected to a particular religion nor does it seek either to promote or interfere with religion. (*The Sociology of Religion*, 247)

The author expresses his inner motivation of rebelling against evils. So he writes about Mumbai riots in this novel and expresses those situations through the protagonist Vijay. In fourth chapter, 'City of fear' Vijay said:

Bombay would live and die on its streets, its crowded bazaars and Mohallas, and even as they went about their daily lives, its millions watched and wondered if they would be expected to sacrifice themselves for their city. But the same fear that ruled their lives hobbled the venal politicians and criminals who stayed their hand for the time being for fear of retribution from the other side. (TSOE 59)

Davidar largely focused the inconveniences of poor Bombaies of secular India during the religious violence. He has written a chapter especially for explicating the longings and mourning of laymen in the roads of the vast city.

I myself saw three dead last night and tonight there will be more. I remembered stories about South Indian and Gujarati immigrants being targeted by mobs in Bombay a few decades earlier, when they were accused by opportunistic politicians of taking jobs away from native-born people of the state, and I worried briefly about these riots losing their focus, turning from one target to another. (TSOE 48)

On 6 December 1992, the rioters demolished the mosque in Ayodhya. Because of the violent activities more than 10,000 lives were affected including the protagonist Vijay. He sees the reflection of the upsurge of fundamentalism everywhere in the country. Davidar expresses the fear and frustration of Bombaies. Through his narration;

The night belonged to the rioters, and although so far most of the victims had been Muslim, there was always the likelihood that the flames could reach out to others, especially those who belong to the minority communities or were newcomers to the city.

(TSOE 44)

The text shows a vivid picture of the merciless attitudes of the fundamentalists to the pedestrians of the night. The mob of the rioter first identified the signs which they had and then they decided to kill them or not. Davidar denotes 'that it is a wound to Gandhiji's dream of secular India'.

I saw in the aftermath of the killings that this is a common symptom of post-traumatic street disorder-victims almost always blank out the most extreme aspects of the violence they are witnessing in order to protect themselves. (TSOE 52)

Davidar wants to uproot all the violence in the name of religion and frame a new Chromosome of peaceful and prosperous India. The census of Mumbai riots says that most of the Victims are the laymen. His fear is shown from the lines of the text,

I stumbled over something on the pavements. I hadn't been looking down but around, trying to figure out where we were, and in the dim light I hadn't noticed what seemed to a pile of rubbish. But now, as my eyes adjusted to the light cast by a single street light about thirty feet away, I saw something that was to burn brightly in the nightmares I suffered in the aftermath of the riots. (TSOE 51)

In Mumbai Riots, the fundamentalists killed hundreds of people. Similarly in Meham also the fundamentalists do the same. These two are the examples cited in this novel for giving evidence for the cruelty of fundamentalists. But a real follower of any religion will be secularized himself through the doctrines of the particular religion. Jatava says in his book *Glimpses of Indian Social Thought*,

Secularism is not an anti-religion idea. It is a positive attitude towards religious tradition. The state should not discriminate, on the basis of religion or religious affiliation. The concept of secular state "postulates that political institutions must be based on the economic and social interests of the entire community, without reference to religion, or sect. Secularism, as a social attitude, elevates man and woman above narrow-minded religious dogmatism and fanaticism....Secularism stands for religious toleration, for investment in-empirical world, and for man-centered philosophy of life. It is not hostile to an honest religious life. It is, however, something becoming greater than a religious man. It is to become a true human being and to develop immense love for fellow-members of society. (400)

According to Leela the term 'secularization' itself referred more to the institutional manifestations of religion, or to some elements in the normative structure of society, or to some aspect of the way of seeing the world. The culmination of secularization would be a religionless society. (*The Sociology of Religion*, 226).

Similarly, Davidar explices his own concept of secularism through the protagonist Vijay in the novel. In the Tower of God issue, when the members of all religions quarrel with each other, Davidar says that,

It has the record of violence in the country. This is not Ayodhya, this is not Gujarat, this is not Bombay...I am a good Hindu and I am quite happy to live with a Shiva temple and a Christian shrine side by side, and I believe the majority of Hindus here feel the same way. (TSOE 151)

Based on the Srikrishna Commission report on the Mumbai riots of 1992-1993; people expressed their feelings of aggrievement and insecurity 14 years after the communal carnage in Mumbai. The representatives of people also tried to speak and articulate issues concerning the community. But various individuals and NGOs said there was no need for an MLA to speak there and they had no faith in the elected representatives or the government. But finally, the commission said that only NGOs or individuals were required to speak. Some calm was restored after Dr. Zoya Hasan, member of the Commission suggested that women speak for a while. Though important issues such as education, lack of jobs and overall discrimination were raised, the most vital point was the complete lack of justice after the riots.

Another great discussion that has been given by Davidar through this novel is Mr. Sorebjee's Manuscript named "THE SOLITUDE OF EMPERORS": "Why Ashoka, Akbar and Gandhi Matter to Us Today?" This manuscript consists of three essays on Ashoka, Akbar and Gandhi, and it is through these didactic but interesting essays that one gets to know

India for what it actually is. We learn that India is where a great emperor like Askoka had the courage to give up his thirst for blood and embrace Buddhism; India is where one man Akbar, a Muslim ruler promoted secularism and held religious courts, where he interacted with scholars of different faiths to come up with a unified faith; India is where one man Gandhiji, sans any weapons, sans any army, and sans any riches, brought the most powerful kingdom of the time to its knees, and gave the world a new word, 'satyagraha'. Mahatma Gandhi was also considered as an Emperor, he collected a great mass of people to achieve his goal of Independence. The crucial thing to note about him was that even while he expressed these sentiments for the country and its people, he never gave up being a believer of Hindu and never thought of India as a deeply religious land. Therein lay his genius – articulating his strategies for winning freedom and maintaining the secularism of the nation through the medium of faith.

This book within the book attempts to define secularism as a messianic force that will eventually lead to the creation of an India that maintains its religiosity without compromising its pluralism. Davidar quotes king Ashoka as a man of secular beliefs, who had given up his power after he saw the blood shed of the people in the war. He compares Ashoka with the politicians and asks many questions to the younger generation. Like Vivekananda and others, Davidar also trusts with youngsters to break or washout the pluralism in the religion and to create a world with secular ideologies without any hesitation. Davidar questions the politicians and puts an anchor in the depth of the minds of the readers "How far ahead of his time Ashoka had been! Which leader today would consider giving up his power and devoting his life to the welfare of the people? How many politicians had reigned because of the riots that had broken out in Bombay and elsewhere? One? Shouldn't that make people angry, especially the young?" (TSOE 206).

Ashoka in his forties renounced war and devoted himself to the welfare of the people. He gave up all the entitlements of emperors but stayed on to serve his people. He encouraged charity, built hospitals prohibited animal sacrifice, lined roads with trees and he became a devoted Buddhist and spent a lot of money and time for serving the people. Davidar needs these types of philanthropists in our political parties and in the ruling parties. The elected candidates are mere representatives not as administrators or dictators to the people. When they come to power in the central or state Government they exploit the life of voted people. It is the present condition of secular India. Davidar says indirectly, that the secular India title is only used as a caption not in the real sense.

Single religion countries; do not have these types of problems. They have many inner conflicts in the same religion, because there is one religion but the worshippers are having different views on religion. All religious violence is staged in front of the temples, churches or mosques, Gods are patient from the beginning to the end. It depicts the real truth, that God does not consider the rioters as devotees or disciples.

Finally, Davidar waits for the new emperors to change today's political issues based on religions. They might lead the future in the way of secularism. His voice towards secularism is reflected in each and every pages of the novel. He thinks that the solitude can give strength and direction to reach our goals. Davidar asks the youngsters that you must follow all the goodness in all religions and also celebrate the colours of Holy, the lights of Deepavali, the food of Ramzon and the gifts of Christmas. And he advises to hate only the poverty, violence, savagery, and injustices of his country. Then as he gives a slap on the rioter's cheeks by describe the pathetic situations of the victims' family and he says. "Let their pain become yours".

The new emperor we await will need to combine the renunciation of Ashoka, the syncretic abilities of Akbar and the truth of Gandhiji, but these qualities alone will not be enough. What it is that you should be looking for in

this new header" what trait will set him apart from the pygmies who masquerade as our leaders today but the truth I do not know. The new emperor will come, just as surely as his predecessors walked the earth, but I did not set out to write this tract merely to suggest that we passively wait for his (or her) advent. (TSOE 209)

The politics of religions just ruin the society with the basic culture, integration, sentiments, relations, human values, spirituality and the developments in all sectors. When the human species come to live together, religion is indeed to protect them as well as keep themselves as a beloved group. But later on they are divided into many major and minor groups in the name of religion. No one bothers about the human relationship. After that, many culprits are cheating people in the name of God. Gods in their Vedas, tell about the non – violence, integration of people, tolerance, etc. But at the same time, the uncivilized fundamentalists from all religions preach the negative doctrines and brainwash the literate and illiterate people. Here arises a question, Are religions existing for the people or people existing for the religions? The competition, jealous, covetousness make the people to interpret the religious doctrines in their own version. Here Davidar asks many questions like, when would this cycle of hatred and bloodletting end? Were Muslim murderers any better than their Hindu counterparts? How could the killing of hundreds of innocents be justified no matter how great the provocation? Perhaps what was needed was for the sea to rise up and flood the city wasn't that what the Gods did when evil in the world grew too unmanageable, didn't they simply destroy their creation and start all over again? He wished to reconcile the relations between Hindu, Christian and Muslim through the outcome of the novel, *The Solitude of Emperors*.

Davidar narrates a series of violent actions in this book directly and he brings out the essence of secularism indirectly. Measuring the level of secularization is complicated in the society. Our national mission is 'Unity in Diversity', but the real truth is that there is no possibility in unity in diversity. Fundamentalism is edged with the possibility of violence in the cases of Hindu, Islam and Christian fundamentalism. There have been a number of violent clashes for the past few years among those groups in Indian, Lebanon, Indonesia and other countries. The people of this ultra modern world can join together in working places and family functions except in the sense of religious festivals. They are trying to protect their religious faith or showing their trust with the religion by using of knife, sickle sword, pistols, iron bars etc.

From the novel, the readers came to know about the values of secularism and the worse of religious violence. Normally religious terrorism is designed for the goals to create their symbols of large in number. Now it is using for the political processes. Religious violence has probably existed for as long as in religions. The passions, hatred, brutality expressed in the name of religion make some history, but not create any future. The development of science and technology is also used by the religious terrorists for killing ever more effectively. Hence the novel *The Solitude of Emperors* gives voice for secularism as well as it has searched for answers about the most relevant issue of our time, the politics of Religion.

Thus Davidar narrates the critical situations in the places of worshipping must be a lesson to the fundamentalist as well as the worshippers of all religions in the secular India. He hits the people with his arrow of writings and tries to get the fruit of secularism to our country. This is the text which motivates to sow the seeds of secularism in the hearts of the people and wish to harvest peace in the future. It is often said that violence doesn't achieve anything, if it is true, why these people use violence in order to achieve their goals? Here is a suggestion that if we understand why people engage in violence we have a better chance to prevent it.

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